

Beyond Boundaries

Success Stories of Women Elected to Panchayathraj



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Institute of Social Studies Trust

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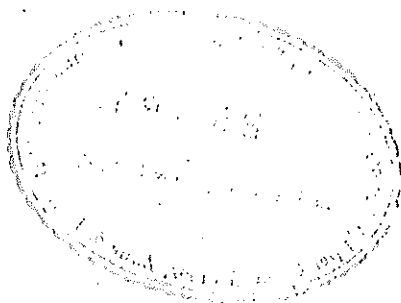


Institute of Social Studies Trust

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BEYOND BOUNDARIES

SUCCESS STORIES OF WOMEN ELECTED
TO PANCHAYATHRAJ



Institute of Social Studies Trust

No.601, North Block, Manipal Centre, 47, Dickenson Road, Bangalore-560 042.

Phone : 5583701, Fax : 5583704 E-mail : isstban@giasbg01.vsnl.net.in

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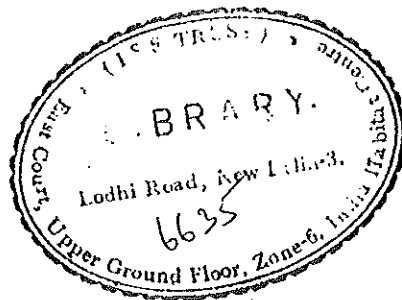
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Editorial Coordination :
Ms. Meera M.

Information Collection :
ISST Team, Bangalore

Presentation :
Ms. Prathibha Nandakumar,
Mr. Pramod

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N-601, North Block, Manipal Centre,
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Phone : 5583701 Fax: 5583704
E-mail : isstban@giasbg01.vsnl.net.in

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The resource book "Beyond Boundaries" is brought to you by the UMA Resource Centre, Institute of Social Studies Trust, Bangalore. "Beyond Boundaries" is an effort to portray the lives of women in Panchayath Raj Institutions who are ushering in winds of change in their own way against all odds. The resource book presents selected case studies of elected women representatives in Karnataka, Tamilnadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh,

Uttar Pradesh with an objective of inspiring other women in similar circumstances.

We are grateful to the elected women representatives who have been our constant source of inspiration. Their courage, wisdom and appreciation strengthen our initiatives.

Struggles, strengths and success of thousands of women in Panchayats of our country are an inspiration to all and our best wishes to each of them. In this resource book we have been able to present a select few. Our grateful thanks to Smt. Sharanavva, Smt. J.B.Gangamma, Smt. Jaibun Bi, Smt. Gangamma, Smt. Shavantrevva Go Jakati, Smt. Muniratnamma, Smt. Kenchamma, Smt. Lakshmidévamma, Smt. Ashwathamma, Smt. Uma Raja, Smt. Margaret Mary, Smt. Kusum Singh Gowtham, Smt. Thresiamma Anthony, Smt. Jalaja Chandran and Smt. Fathima Bee.

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Meera M.
Associate Director
ISST, Bangalore
2002

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The opening...

Entry of large numbers of rural women to the Panchayath Raj Institutions in India effected by the 73rd Amendment to the constitution is resulting in substantial socio-political changes. Most of the women representatives elected to the Panchayath Raj Institutions come from traditional backgrounds that have a very strong patriarchal system of society. Most of them are illiterates or neo-literates. They are bound to their homes and families, which prescribe definite roles to them. Their husbands or male relatives generally play the role of gods in their lives and make all decisions for them.

The conservatives cannot tolerate women donning the leadership roles. They feel women have a limited field of action and they must not trespass. Politics was one such taboo area. Though constitution gives equal opportunities to men and women in a democracy, yet when women contest and win elections, they are made to undergo humiliation, face innumerable hurdles, even physical and mental torture. They have to confront constant efforts made to pull them down. These women who have dared to enter public service have to work doubly hard to prove themselves.

For many, it is indeed impossible to imagine or expect these women to identify, develop and assert their own capabilities and individuality. Fortunately, that is exactly what is happening. They are changing perceptibly. Elected women representatives are blooming beyond barriers, beyond boundaries...

Women elected to the Panchayath Raj Institutions are making a difference and showing achievements despite hardships and have brought in the winds of change. Their achievements are no small measures in terms of the social changes that is emerging. The very fact that women are able to take active role in decision making in the local governance is in itself a remarkable social change. The social evils that were haunting the society for centuries are slowly giving way to awareness and emancipation.

"Beyond Boundaries" is an effort to portray the women who are ushering in the winds of change in their own way against all odds. This resource book presents selected case studies of elected women representatives in Karnataka, Tamilnadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, with the objective of inspiring other women in similar circumstances.

Lives of, Jaibun Bi of Bagalkot, Karnataka, who hails from a traditional muslim family and is going all out to serve the community; Fatima Bi of Kalva, Andhra Pradesh, who literally came out of 'parda' to lead her village on the path of progress and became the first Asian recipient to the UNO Award; Munirathamma of Anekal, Karnataka, who at the age of 52 decided to enter Panchayath; the brave and determined Kusum Singh Goutham of Kanpur who took the lead in a male dominated Panchayath with the intention of improving the status of women; the educated and politically active Thresiamma and Jalaja Chandran of Kerala; Uma Raja and Margaret Mary of Tamil Nadu, who believe in de-centralisation and accurate planning as an effective strategy for development give immense hope and courage to other women across the society. They are the torch bearers of progress. Their achievements are truly remarkable and once again asserts the fact that while understanding women's march to success its not always that changes happen in leaps and bounds, rather it is those small little steps that have mattered. Only when we value and learn to trace even these small steps will these trendsetters get their due share of space under the sun.

"Beyond Boundaries" is an effort to document and disseminate success stories so that many more women and men get the inspiration and courage to bloom beyond boundaries.



**“Who is the boss for
this Panchayath?”
“Yourself, madam!”**

Sharanavva, of Keribhosga village in Gulbarga district of Karnataka, has shown the heights an illiterate woman can reach, if she decides. It was a momentous transformation from being just someone to that of one who successfully led a village to an agitation for water.

Sharanavva of Keribhosga village in Gulbarga is an illiterate woman. When a Sahayogini of Mahila Samakhya Program for women started a Mahila Sangha in the village, curiosity got the better of her and she enrolled herself without having an idea of what it was all about. But with this, her life changed dramatically. She regularly attended the weekly meetings and learnt about savings. She also started to take interest regarding various issues concerning the village.

One day, the Sahayogini mentioned that the elections for Gram Panchayath were announced and asked if any one was interested in contesting. At first every one thought it was beyond their capabilities and brushed it off with a shrug. But when the Sahayogini motivated them and suggested Sharanavva's name, Sharanavva herself was stunned by the idea. It was such an absurd suggestion for her. However Sharanavva thought about it for a day and decided that she shall give it a try. The other members encouraged her and she submitted her nomination. She was elected, as was expected.

First meeting

Then came the day to attend the first meeting. Sharanavva went to the Panchayath office. There were other elected male members who took part in the meeting. Sharanavva just sat there without realising what was happening. Even when the meeting concluded she continued to sit until some one told her to go home!

This got repeated in a couple of meetings. But, by then Sharanavva had become curious to know more about the meetings. She wanted to know about the proceedings. It was a painstaking process for her while she got to learn by and by, as days passed on.

One day she wanted to know who the 'Boss' was.

She called the peon in the Panchayath office and asked, "Who is the boss for this Panchayath, the Bill collector or the Secretary?"

He replied "Yourself, madam!" This came as a big surprise to Sharanavva. It was at that point of time that she decided to learn everything about the Panchayath.

Who was the thief?

The Panchayath had sanctioned some funds for the purchase of books for the local school children. Later, when Sharanavva learnt that the children were not given books, she made enquiries. She came to know that some members at the Panchayath had misappropriated the funds.

She was furious. She brought it up in the next meeting and insisted that an enquiry must be conducted and the funds be returned by the culprits. When Sharanavva announced that she would bring this to the notice of higher officials, the culprits had no other choice but to repay the money.

Garbage clearance

There was a vacant plot of land in the village where people used to dump the garbage. With no system of clearing the garbage, it became a huge pile of waste and became a health hazard to all. When the stink from the garbage became unbearable, Sharanavva raised it in the meeting and suggested that it must be cleared. But the other members felt, that it was not the duty of the Panchayath to clear the garbage. It was a determined Sharanavva who consulted and sought help from her friends at the Mahila Sangha. Carts were hired and garbage was cleared. When the plot finally got cleared of garbage, there was no end to people's happiness. More and more people started coming to Sharanavva to consult and to solve their problems.

'Road block' agitation

Keribhosga village had acute water shortage. Repeated requests to the concerned officials fell on deaf ears. Sharanavva consulted her colleagues at the mahila sangha and it was decided they launch a "Road Block Agitation" to draw attention to the problem.

Hundreds of men and women joined hands and squat on the highway demanding that the officers attend to their demands. The busy highway traffic came to a stand still.

The Tahasildar and the Deputy Commissioner of Gulbarga rushed to the spot and only after their assurance, the agitation was called off. As a result of this agitation the village got water facility.

No chance for misappropriation

One of the village temples was in a bad condition. The Panchayath sanctioned some funds for the renovation of the temple. Later, some members started suggesting that the funds must be used for donating uniforms to school children rather than for renovation of the temple. Sharanavva saw what was coming. It was yet another attempt to misappropriate funds like it was done earlier. She, along with her women colleagues, brought it up in the meeting and saw to it that the funds were used for the intended purpose only.

When the Secretary of Panchayath refused to give up his hold on the funds, Sharanavva also inspired other members of the Panchayath to not only question this, but also to assert that the decision making power was in the hands of the elected representatives. As a result of which, Rs. one lakh that was sanctioned for the betterment of the village was spent for the intended purpose and not otherwise.

'Let others have a chance'

Sharanavva completed her term at the Panchayath with very successful output. The people of her village were so satisfied with her work that they wanted her to contest again. But she refused. She wanted to give an opportunity to another woman to learn and become successful. "I will support her in every way", she said and even ensured that the new woman contestant got Rs.800 as support money to contest the election from the mahila sangha. And this was a great gesture, where instead of hanging on to the power seat she stood in support of another woman.



Growing from grassroots

Gangamma of Choranutu Gram Panchayath, Sandur taluk, Bellary district in Karnataka has shown immense strength and has grown from the grassroots. She sets an example for perseverance and commitment.

Gangamma, residing at Jeergenahalli, belongs to a poor farmers family. With a small plot of land it was not possible to provide for the entire family. The elders of the family would take up work as laborers yet it was difficult to make both the ends meet.

That was the time when a Irrigation Project was taken up in the district. The project office conducted a workshop, training and awareness camp for the people in the surrounding area. Gangamma attended the camp and this proved a turning point for her. She was inspired to join Jhansi Rani Self Help Group (SHG). She took active role in the SHG and soon became popular in her village.

Gangamma's zeal and enthusiasm impressed the Project officers who appointed her as a Volunteer. She was given the work of creating awareness among people regarding health, sanitation, kitchen garden etc. She helped other women form SHGs, guided people to contact the concerned Govt. officials, for applying a loan, suggestions to care for pregnant women, motivating children to attend school and such other matters. She became so good at counseling that people started approaching her even for domestic issues.

Jeergenahalli had definite caste practices that did not permit people of different castes to visit each other's homes. The Lingayaths would not visit anyone from a backward community. Gangamma never made any discrimination between different castes, she visited any one in need of help and gave her services. This invited the wrath of the conservatives. They started criticising her. Their contention was that Gangamma was always busy visiting people, that too people from the lower strata of the society and that it was not becoming of a woman from a respectable family to be doing that.

"They tried to stop me. But I did not heed to their complaints. So they tried to poison the minds of my family members." says Gangamma. Her family did not want to invite any trouble in the village and asked her to give up her activities. But Gangamma was convinced that what she was doing was service to the society and felt she must not stop because of some resistance. This resulted in frequent quarrels at home but Gangamma put up with it, with a brave front.

Elections

When the Gram Panchayath elections were announced , many people in the village suggested that Gangamma should contest. But her family was totally against it.

“ How can poor folks like us even think of contesting for the election? With out money how can anyone win? It’s a futile exercise” they said.

But local leaders got wind of this and they came to meet Gangamma at home. Their assurance was that, since Gangamma was popular with the people she would surely win. They even promised financial assistance. After being convinced by the local leaders, family members agreed and Gangamma submitted her nomination.

Victory

As expected Gangamma won the election. She was very enthusiastic about attending the meetings. She was the most punctual member and never missed a meeting or came late.

She learnt everything about the functioning of Panchayath and took part in the proceedings very actively. Ever eager to serve the public, Gangamma acquired detailed knowledge about all the facilities provided to the rural public by the government.

She constantly made effort to create awareness in the people regarding various development measures provided by the govt. She got electricity under the Bhagyajyothi project, Ashraya houses to the poor, food grains under public distribution system, good roads under Swachha Grama project and drinking water to the village.

Gangamma never made any distinction between caste. She treated everyone as equals.

And Gangamma never misused her office for her own benefit. Corruption was something she could never think of, even in her dreams.

Women power

Gangamma believed in inner strength of women. She was instrumental in forming many SHGs in the village. She helped them to get bank loans sanctioned for undertaking income generating activities. Her approach was holistic, in the sense, she always tried to educate people about the social problems of the society as well as need for economic independence. Social injustice and evil practices of the society were her focus of attention, she wanted to create awareness in the people against it. She wanted the women, especially, to empower themselves to fight such evils.

Recognition

Gangamma’s efforts paid rich dividends. People respected her advice. She was always consulted on important issues related to the village. All this brought in significant changes in the attitude of her family members as well. They also started treating her with regard and eventually felt very proud and happy about her. Today they help her in her work and lend all support, at home as well as in public.

“ I never gave up even when I faced serious setbacks. It finally paid off. Today I am ready to contest ‘big’ election, meaning Taluk and Zilla Panchayath elections” says Gangamma. She marches on winning against all odds.





The Eye Opener

Kelawadi is a remote village in Badami taluk, Bagalakote district. Jaibun Bi, member of Kelawadi Gram Panchayath, coming from a traditional Muslim family has shown the way to development. Even loosing an eye has not curbed her spirits.

The air was filled with excitement and awe in the remote village of Kaji Boobihal, Kelawadi Gram Panchayath, Badami taluk, Bagalkot district of Karnataka.

The whole village had gathered to welcome Jai Bun Bee, the bride of a local youth.

The reason for awe was that, she had passed SSLC. No woman in the village had studied up to SSLC in Kaji Boodihal.

Jaibun Bi hailed from a traditional Muslim family. She was married into another traditional family. Her duty was to carry out the household chores and be a 'good' wife.

Jaibun Bi was happy with that and she gave birth to four children in quick succession.

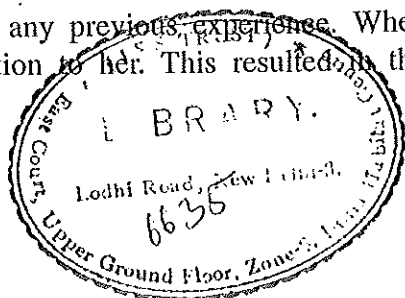
One day she heard some noise outside her house and she looked out to see many elders of the village gathered. Her husband was talking to them. She did not give much attention to that. Her husband later told her that the elders of the village had come to ask her to contest for the Gram Panchayath elections in the reserved seat for women, as she was the most educated woman in the entire village. In view of her education they had decided that she was best suited to contest.

Jaibun Bi was stunned. How could she contest, she did not have any experience even in talking to people? She had never before even entered a hall full of men! She did not know anything about the Panchayath. Moreover time was not enough to just complete work at home and how could she find time for all this? She asked her husband to be reasonable.

However her husband felt otherwise. He was confident that she could learn everything. He was happy that elders had chosen his wife to contest. He tried to convince her. "But what about the children?" asked Jaibun Bi. He assured her that he and his mother would look after the children when she was called for the meetings. Now, Jaibun Bi had no more reasons to refuse. She submitted her nomination.

In fresh waters

Jaibun Bi was elected for the Gram Panchayath. She had to attend meetings. Most of the members were men. There were other five women elected along with Jaibun Bi but none of them had any previous experience. Whenever a woman tried to speak, the men never paid any attention to her. This resulted in the women becoming even more timid.



Coming from a very traditional background, Jaibun Bi was not used to public talk or to pursue her points. Just when she was feeling helpless, came an invitation from ISST to attend a training program for all the elected women members of Panchayaths.

Waiting for such an opportunity, Jaibun Bi was eager to learn. She actively participated at the training, right from understanding Panchayath Raj structures, powers and duties of Panchayaths and representatives, budget, gramasabhas, public speaking, including the common problems that can occur and how to solve them etc. At the end of the training Jaibun Bi was so geared up to work that, when the participants got an opportunity to present their views and reactions, it was Jaibun Bi who volunteered to not only speak but also read out a brief report of the training which she had voluntarily prepared! She not only prepared a very accurate report but also made a neat presentation of it in the presence of EEO and BDO. This was a momentous occasion for her and all others present.

Achievements

Jaibun Bi took up Panchayath work in all seriousness. She first spoke to all the defaulters of tax and persuaded them to pay the arrears. This was to the tune of Rs. 25,000/- She then gathered the immediate problems confronting the people from them and got the Panchayath to take it up. Accordingly water supply, street light and road repair was taken up on priority, under the BPL project. She got Green Card and Red Cards made for the people of her village. When she came to know that Anganavadis had irregular supply of food she took up the issue with the concerned officer and rectified the error.

Jaibun Bi got water tanks and five toilets constructed. Constructions under Ashraya project was about to be shelved in the pretext of paucity of land. It was Jaibun Bi who suggested that barren land in the village be utilized for this purpose. Accordingly houses were built. Jaibun Bi believes that all women must be educated and she undertook extensive propaganda in support of educating girls. She also got the village school repaired and encourages parents to send their children to school. Kelawadi Gram Panchayath did not consider it important to conduct meetings at regular intervals. Sometimes the meetings were not conducted for long time. Jaibun Bi, mustered support from her women colleagues and together they insisted that meetings be conducted regularly. Once, when she came to know that two works were getting lapsed Jaibun Bi did not hesitate to even spend Rs.4,000 from her own pocket which was in fact a hard decision. She was also responsible in motivating the women of her village to undergo vocational training to become self employed.

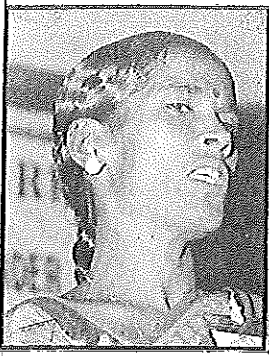
The eye that was lost

Jaibun Bi used to be preoccupied in thinking of ways to serve the people better. One day while cutting wood, she was so immersed in thoughts that a splinter hit her eye and she permanently lost the sight in that eye. However this has not diminished her spirits. She continues to get involved in her work with the same seriousness that she had earlier.

It was soon after loosing her eye that she put her best effort and got an Anganawadi school sanctioned for the village.

School is a temple

When a plot of land earmarked for the construction of a high school for girls was being given away to build a temple Jaibun Bi fiercely opposed it. She said 'School is a place of worship'. She is still fighting to get the school built in that plot. Her struggle is on to make her Panchayath a better place. And in this struggle what Jaibun Bi has achieved goes much beyond words.



Where there is a will

Gangamma of Chikamagalur district of Karnataka is a living example of what a woman can achieve if she has the will to pursue. She is not only serving the community but also commanding respect from the same people who had ridiculed her earlier.

Gangamma of Cheeranahalli, is an excellent example of woman power. She hails from the small village of Danduru, Tarikere taluk, Chikkamagalur district. When she was studying in the second standard her parents took her out of the school. They were of the opinion that girls need not be educated. Gangamma was made to do all the household chores and when she was nearing twenty years of age she was married to Basavarajappa of Danduru. They had two sons. Within fifteen years of marriage Basavarajappa died and the responsibility of looking after the children fell on Gangamma. She worked hard to bring up the children, yet it was very difficult to provide for even basic needs.

Turning point

It was testing time for Gangamma when people of Danduru got on to the habit of criticising everything that Gangamma did. Widowhood brought with it difficult problems, added to that people had their own sanctions against her. They were intimidating her all the time. This made Gangamma very cautious. It was at this juncture that an NGO called Vikasana started a mahila sangha in her village. Gangamma gathered all her courage and joined the sangha. She underwent training in knitting, tailoring etc. Gradually she gained much more than the skills, it gave her confidence. She set out to serve the people.

Opportunity knocks at her door

Just then, the Gram Panchayath elections were announced. Gangamma felt it was an opportunity to serve the people. She approached the Panchayath office and asked for information. But to her utter shock she was humiliated. Neither did she get any information. Disappointed she sought support from the sangha. They not only supported her, but also went with her to fill the nomination form. When her relatives came to know of this they were even more critical of her. But that did not stop Gangamma. She went ahead with filing of the nomination form. Her relatives stopped talking to her.

But when she presented her papers, she was told that she could not contest the elections as there was no male member in her family!

Sangha members took up her case and they questioned the Panchayath office and asked them 'where is such a rule written, show it to us'. They argued on Gangamma's behalf and finally the office had to accept the nomination.

When Ganamma's nomination was accepted, her critics were agitated and they convinced one more woman to contest against Gangamma. This did not discourage Gangamma. "May the deserving candidate win" she said.

But as days passed by, the people of Danduru were convinced that Gangamma was the best candidate. They approached the other contestant and requested her to take back her nomination, which she did. And Gangamma was elected unanimously. She became the vice-president. She devoted herself to work for the community.

Land grabbing

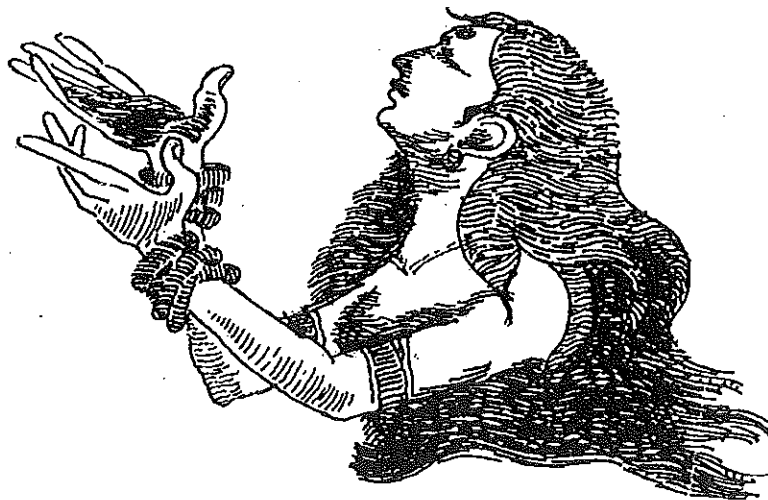
In the village of Danduru, there were some people who had constructed houses on the Nayak's road. This was illegal construction. It created a lot of problem for people and restricted free movement on that road. All requests to vacate fell on deaf ears. They did not listen even when the Panchayath members requested.

Gangamma felt that it was unfair that a few powerful people enjoyed the public land, while public suffered. She, along with her colleagues, lodged a complaint with the police. With help from police she got them evicted and after pulling down the illegal construction, she got half a kilometer of the road repaired, which proved to be very convenient to the public. It was for the first time that police help was sought to solve a problem in Danduru and people appreciated her efforts.

Gangamma had a 'knack' for detecting malpractices. When it came to her notice that the Public distribution system was serving bad quality groceries and that there were discrepancies in the weight, she immediately brought it to the notice of the concerned official and set it right.

Work of Gangamma was making her very popular. She was not only concerned about the sociological aspects of Danduru but also about the cultural heritage. She wanted to provide opportunities to every one to take part in cultural activities. Danduru did not have a community hall to conduct public functions. Gangamma convinced a person who had a vacant plot to donate it for construction of a community hall. Gangamma got the Panchayath to donate funds for the construction of a building on that plot. A spacious community hall is under construction at Danduru.

"Now I am ready to contest even taluk and Jilla panchayath elections as well" says Gangamma. Such of those who had made fun of her, salute her efforts and success now. Gangamma is a living example of the saying 'where there is a will, there is a way'.





Unity is Strength

Shavantrevva Go Jakati believes that 'unity is strength'. She gained confidence through sheer perseverance, determination and hard work. She made a difference in the lives of many Devadasis.

Tea time

Shavantrevva Go Jakati was elected as the representative to the Panchayath from Tamba village of Indi taluk in Bijapur of Karnataka. She had never set out of her familiar surroundings before. At the first meeting of the panchayath, she sat with other women elected members. Some men spoke, she could make nothing of that. Tea was served and after a little while they declared that meeting was over and asked her to collect her meeting allowance. After she collected that and signed her name she was asked to go home.

Couple of more meetings went on just as this. During one such meeting, she got up and left the meeting, since no one took any notice of her presence nor explained anything to her leave alone ask her views on the proceedings!

However Shavantrevva was intrigued by the meetings. She was curious to know about her role and when she was called by an organisation called Sabala to attend a training work shop for women representatives of Panchayaths, she was overjoyed.

Solutions

Shavatravva had many questions to ask and did not know whom to ask. At the workshop she made the best use of the opportunity and learnt a great deal. When ISST conducted a state level training camp, Shavantrevva participated in that as well. Equipped with the training inputs, it was a changed Shavantravva who attended the next Panchayath meeting. She started taking active interest in the proceedings. Some of the terms used by the secretary and the men were now familiar to her. This helped her learn more and others had no choice but take note of her presence in the meetings!

Lack of support

Shavantravva was born in the backward community of Talawars. She was married at an early age and had borne five children. She lost her husband when the children were at a tender age. This put the burden of bringing up the children all on her. She had no support from any one.

Shavantrevva learnt to write her name during the literacy campaign but that was all. When the elections for the Panchayath was announced she simply wondered why she could not contest?

There was none to coax her or stop her. She submitted her nomination to the reserved seat for women and had got elected. Her initial meeting days when she was asked to 'have her tea and collect the allowance and go home' had made her wonder why this idea to contest had ever come to her head!

Training marked a major change in Shavantrevva's life. She realised the power her position held. She used her powers and got IRDP loan to 10 women and DRP loans to 12 women. She got 7 bore wells dug in the village for drinking water facility. She gathered information about the facilities that were available for rural people and had got sanctions for electricity, delivery allowance and ration cards.

Rehabilitation of Devadasis

Tamba was facing the problem of Devadasi system that was forcing young girls and women to lead a life of shame. Shavantrevva started creating awareness among people against devadasi practices. She launched a Devadasi Women's association and got bank loans sanctioned for them to undertake self employment schemes. Many Devadasis took up dairying, cattle rearing and sericulture, which gave them an opportunity to integrate with the main stream of the society.

Shavantrevva started a mahila sangha and arranged for women to undergo training in embroidery. After six months of training they were given a place to start their own embroidering units. She also initiated group savings. The Sangha was such a success that, inspired by this, many other sanghas were started. For the poor, backward community this was a silent revolution.

Federation of Women

Shavantrevva had realised the power of unity. She mobilised women from Indi, Sindagi and Bijapura taluks to form a Federation of Women and called it the Mahileyara Hakkina Sangha (Women's Rights Federation). She is the President of this federation. "Women must empower themselves and become self confident" is what Shavantrevva advices.





More might than mere words

*Most women in India develop a sense of detachment after the age of 50. They give up social life and confine themselves exclusively for family life. Not **Muniratamma** of Attibele Gram Panchayath, near Anekal taluk. She got into politics after she turned 52 and has shown more might than mere words!*

As people approach fifty, the meekly mumble, "everything is over with me now, it's time I retired." They detach from social life and limit themselves to the personal affairs. But to prove that this is not true with women, especially with rural women Muniratamma's achievement stands out as testimony. At an age when people usually get confined to four walls of their dwelling, she is incessantly active, involved totally in social life. What she says is note worthy, "The people who think of nothing more to do must work for the development of women."

Muniratamma who is 52 years old now is a GP member of Attibele of Anekal Taluk near Bangalore. She belongs to a middle class family of dalits. Her struggle for life is intermingled with her political struggle. Muniratamma who is efficiently managing political affairs with that of domestic responsibilities is setting a model.

Politics by choice

Politics is Muniratamma's favourite area therefore she did not need any coaxing to join politics. Added to her enthusiasm, *praja vimochana chaluvali* too backed her. She contends that politics is not dirty; women must get the political experience. According to her, "The 33% reservation is not sufficient, we need at least 50%. All these years men have ruled and have achieved little. Now it is our chance; give us the reign from panchayath up to the prime ministership for five years and we shall prove ourselves." When she speaks thus you don't find bitterness about men instead there is the genuine concern for the society and to achieve something.

Muniratamma's life has not been a bed of roses; people at home asked her not to run around at this old age. She had the irrepressible zeal to address to problems of downtrodden, she wanted to do good to society through gram panchayath. Her zeal strengthened her determination to get into politics. People too encouraged her by telling, "We are with you since you are active and smart. In any case you will win; why support others and waste our votes?" These words of assurance prompted her to contest for GP elections.

But winning the election was not an easy task; she had to time manage for election campaign as well as for household chores, it was burdensome. But her devotion to the cause of women and other deprived masses gave her strength to face the challenge. Her promise of good governance won peoples heart and she in return won the election.

The changed position

Because of politics there has been considerable change in Muniratamma's position. The people who used to call her by name now address her as *madam*; they show respect by a *namaskara*. She is invited to all the programmes and is given seat in the front rows. Even at home her image has

been boosted. They say with fondness, "You must be made not merely GP member but prime minister of the country!"

Village development is the sole aim

Muniratamma doesn't merely speak, she shows by her work. Her achievement with in eighteen months of her tenure is noticeable. One furlong road that connects Chickhalli to the main road is metalled, a well is bore for drinking water and drainage is made by the side, 16 water taps are installed, four houses have come up under various schemes, 4-5 latrines are built under *nirmala karnataka yojana*. She has helped women to apply for widow's pension and maternity benefits, there has been efforts at starting a *mahila sangha*. Though Muniratamma is not much educated she is aware of the importance of education- she visits school regularly to meet with the teachers and to enquire about the attendance and progress. She visits the hostel and looks into the quality of food and other facilities, she discusses about the activities of Anganwadi, more importantly she meets the hotel owners and while looking into cleanliness there she advises them not to employ children.

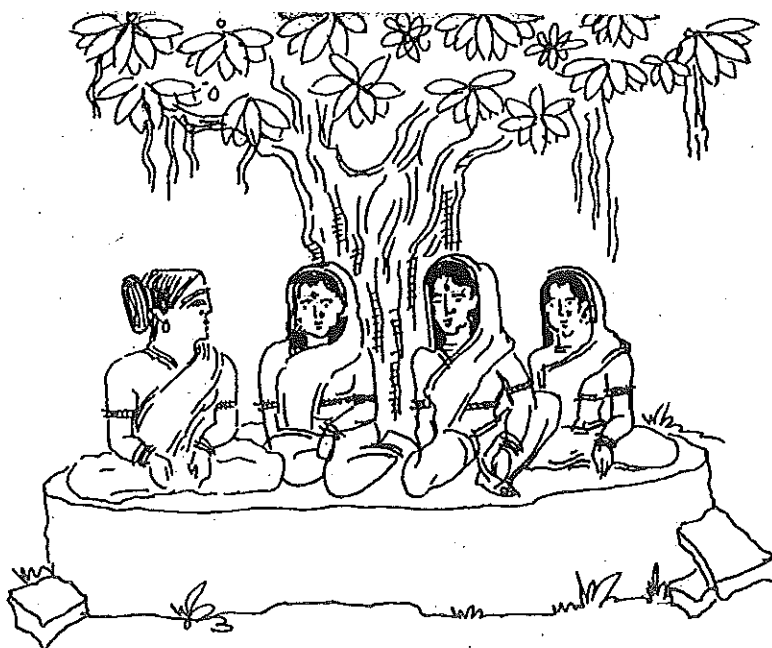
Muniratamma's greatest aspiration is to get Cauvery water to Attibele; she has even threatened that if it doesn't happen she will put up a *dharna* in front of irrigation ministers office. Thats her commitment for the people. In spite of her achievements she is still humble when she says, "I have not done much there is still a lot to be accomplished." To prove her point she comes up with a long list of work to be done- more information need to be made available to women, social justice has to be done to them and their education must get greater emphasis. She says, every time she visits the ward or officials she has a copy of Panchayath Raj Act in her hand.

Irrepressible zeal

Muniratamma's greatest concern is regarding women's development. She is ready to give up her position, if more women are ready to get into politics. She shares her experiences with other women in order to coax them to take part in active politics. She believes that exploitation by men will end only when women come to the places of power. She feels that there is not much encouragement for women's empowerment, yet she strives for it day and night.

Give the nation in our hands

Muniratamma queries, "What have the men folk done to the nation during past 50 years?" And she herself comes up with the answer, "...nothing but harassment; women cringe to this harassment, but we can't allow this to happen any more. Women must have equal opportunities. If women were given a chance they will join hands in giving a good governance. Therefore give the nation in our hands for five years and we shall prove that we have the endurance and can achieve what the men could not do all these years." There is more conviction in her words than what sounds.





Marching on... against all odds

Kenchamma of Neralekere is an example of a rural Dalit woman who has made a tremendous impact in her Panchayat. She is easily one of the most significant women President, who marched on...against all odds. Her success story has inspired many other women.

The day dawned like any other. For Kenchamma it was special ... different! To her surprise, her name had been suggested for the Gram Panchayat elections. Recalling those moments she says - "To be frank... I was in a state of utter confusion! It was something unimaginable. As a SC and a coolie, how could I ever have thought of sitting in the Panchayat and representing a whole lot of people? The little exposure I had was of a tailoring course organised by Vikasana of Tarekere and of having taken up a few developmental activities in my village Neralekere. Apart from this I had no exposure, whatsoever".

Even though Kenchamma had completed her middle school, she was not able to muster much courage. She had little knowledge about politics and electoral processes. Not being able to face a crowd and make speeches was an added disadvantage. As if this was not enough, she faced stiff opposition from her in-laws. This made her shun this opportunity. It was the continued support and encouragement from her husband that finally made her contest for the elections.

The saga of elections :

As Kenchamma's recalls - "I was elected unanimously, but the trauma I underwent during the elections for the President's post was unimaginable.

During the elections, she faced strong opposition from the rivals. They managed to bribe her husband and stifle his support. They made sure she was sent out of the village for a fortnight. The in-laws took Kenchamma to her parents place in order to avoid further hassler.

However, the strong supporters of Kenchamma, came in search, convinced her in-laws & brought her back to the village. They provided her a tight security.

Opposition members on learning that she has been brought back to fight the elections, cast aspersions on her and family.

Finally, on the day of the elections, Kenchamma proved her popularity by getting 9 out of 10 votes and was elected as the G.P. President.

Not a bed of roses ...

"My new responsibilities were a challenge to me. I am not well educated. I read upto class Seven. I decided now that, I am in the river, I have no choice but to swim across to reach the coast. That's how I gathered courage. Slowly, I began to study on my own. I began to discover the capacity and power within me. I started tapping my latest talents. In the beginning, things weren't smooth enough and I had to go through a difficult path due to my lack of experience" says Kenchamma.

Soon after Kenchamma took over as the President of Neralekere G.P., she had to attend a meeting of the Presidents in the Taluka Panchayat office. As usual, her husband had accompanied her. But her husband was strictly refused to join her in the meeting. There after Kenchamma did not take her husband to the successive G.P. Meetings.

Kenchamma's caste proved to be her biggest drawback. The secretary was never in good terms with her. He would belittle her because she was a SC. He would trouble her a lot. He would order and she would obey! Fed up, Kenchamma went upto CEO, complained to him and got him transferred.

There was no separate building for this Gram Panchayat. The meetings would be conducted either in the Vice-President's house or in open space. When the members of G.P. requested the school authorities to lend them a room in the school premises, they were refused.

The members under Kenchamma's guidance decided to construct a G.P. Building. While the building was under construction, they hired a house to conduct meetings. The house happened to belong to an upper caste family. Upon knowing that the G.P. President is SC, they were immediately vacated with all the chairs and tables thrown out into the street.

The members had to make do with the half constructed G.P. Office. Finally the new G.P. Office was ready, but there were more problems! Some members opposed Kenchamma inaugurating the new office since she was a SC. The inauguration ceremony was postponed indefinitely, with the hopes that the second term election which was due would be announced and the GP would have a new president. But to their disappointment the elections got postponed for another year, during which period, Kenchamma along with her supporters made it a point to complete the inaugural function.

Milestones ...

During her tenure as the President, she not only implemented programmes focussing on women and children but also programmes relating to health, Anganwadi, Community Development, income generating schemes and so on. Under the community development works road, water, street lights, a permanent building for the G.P. Office and sanitation works have been successfully implemented.

"As an individual, I have grown by leaps and bounds" She says. Her entry into politics has boosted her confidence and courage to speak before a large audience. She is able to confidently face the higher officials, discuss with them and get work done. Presently, she is working as a grassroot worker for VIKASANA and is an active member of Child Labour Committee.

Plan's for future :

Kenchamma plans to build up many more self help groups. She wants to be an active member in Women's movements, community development activities. She plans to take up women's issue as a prime concern. With confidence she says "I want to join hands with the campaign against alcoholism".

She is also lobbying women to enter into local politics. In this regard she says, 'I have motivated 50 women from the neighbouring villages to contest for elections'.

During the second term elections she had contested from general quota. But she was forced to withdraw her nomination. She plans to contest for TP & ZP elections also, but scared about the expenditures she has to incur.

What strikes one on meeting Kenchamma is her confidence and sensitivity. Even though Kenchamma is not holding any position in the panchayat she has been actively involved in taking up people's issues with the support of VIKASANA and NGO in Taikere.

Kenchamma chose to actively contribute inspite of not being panchayat president. Her concern to support current EWRs and her vast hands-on experience has proved most encouraging for the new EWRs.

We hope many more such elected Women representatives who may not hold positions during this term continue to take on positive roles. Many like Kenchamma can extend the much required support new EWRs and share from their wealth of experience. Solidarity of these sisters in politics will help sail through the turbid tides of politics, even life itself.



Talented folk singer and active people's representative

Lakshmiddevamma of Mugali, a remote village in Tarikere, Chickmagalur of Karnataka has proved that family support can strengthen a woman's effort at serving the community. She has ventured into frontiers rare for women as a folk singer and a Gram Panchayath member. She has the satisfaction of having done her best.

Lakshmiddevamma is an active Gram Panchayath Member from Mugali. Being a talented folk singer, she has stayed closer to the people.

Initiation

Laxmiddevamma was married into a family of activists. Her father-in-law was active in politics. He encouraged her to take interest in politics and initiated her entry. She first started as a member of the local school development committee and implemented various measures for the betterment of the school.

Lakshmiddevamma later started a mahila sangha for the young women of Mugali, called Atunodaya Yuvathi Mandali. She initiated literacy classes, tailoring, knitting and such activities. People of the village started approaching her for help in getting widow and old age pensions sanctioned. Way back in 1978, Lakshmiddevamma was actively involved in creating awareness regarding family planning, family welfare programmes, literacy campaigns, etc.

Folk art for change

Lakshmiddevamma is a talented folk singer. She performs on All India Radio. She has formed a Women's folk art troupe and has trained them. One such art form where women are rare is the Veeragase folk art and she has formed the Women's Veeragase troupe. Folk art being a powerful tool for social change her attempt is to make full use of its potential and her commitment to this art form makes it possible.

Withdrawal with a difference

When elections for the Panchayath was announced, Lakshmiddevamma's father in law asked her to contest. She contested from two wards and was elected from both the wards.

But when Lakshmiddevamma came to know that a woman who had contested from one of the wards had married out of caste and that she was facing many hardships, Lakshmiddevamma not only withdrew from there and surrendered it to her but also supported her in every respect.

Support to one and all

Lakshmiddevamma, after being elected, intensified her efforts to develop the village. There was seven acres of grassland for cattle grazing at the village. Some had acquired the land illegally and prevented cattle from grazing there. This made the people send the cattle to the forest. This was a matter of concern and Lakshmiddevamma went to court, got a stay order and removed the illegal occupant. It was thrown open for everyone's use.

Many incidents where she fought for the rights of poor and the deprived have motivated others. She has confronted the rich and influential during incidences when pieces of land belonging to the poor were snatched from them. She even got 27 houses built for the backward families.

Once, Lakshmiddevamma met a woman on the road crying, on asking the reason she learnt that the woman was beaten up by a landlord. Lakshmiddevamma couldn't help but immediately go to the landlord. She took up this issue with him, sorted out and even ensured that the landlord apologized to the woman. For Lakshmiddevamma even one woman's problem is a matter of importance. She feels that in politics where number matters many politicians like to address a problem only when large numbers are affected.

Appreciation

Lakshmiddevamma is the recipient of many awards. She was honored with the 'Best Woman' award in 1992, 'Best young woman' award in 1993 by the Nehru Yuvaka Sangha, Janapada award in recognition of her singing talent, Golden jubilee award and Commendable service award in 1997. Many of the folk artists groups that she has established also have received awards.

Beckoning new frontiers

Lakshmiddevamma has travelled much and cherishes those experiences. She has attended workshops in Delhi, Chennai, Kerala and other places. She is sensitive to women's issues and works towards creating awareness among the public. She believes that positions of power give ample opportunity for public service. She wants to provide opportunities to the young to achieve greater heights in life. Working to support women is her aim and she is striving to sensitise others in her village about this. Lakshmiddevamma is now ready to contest from Taluk and Zilla panchayath. "I want to serve the community till my last" she says.





Wealth of Awards

Ashwathamma of Chandapura, Anekal taluk is a recipient of many awards, including the Ideal Panchayath Award and The Common Wealth Award, for her commendable work. Her firm belief is that women's empowerment is the stepping stone for progress.

The Best Gram Panchayath

Ashwathamma's election as the President of the Chandapura Gram Panchayath, Anekal taluk, Bangalore rural of Karnataka surprised none because she had gained popularity through her social services in Chandapura village. She was deeply interested in politics from very early age and was a loyal member of a political party. As soon as the Gram Panchayath elections were declared, a political sympathiser of another party asked her to contest. She declined. Her family also felt that it was not good for women to enter active politics. But the political leaders persisted and convinced her to contest. She finally agreed and as expected was elected unanimously. She was the inevitable choice for the President's post.

Within a short period of four years, Ashwathamma was able to take up major developmental activities in the village. Her zeal to provide basic amenities to the rural population and the success she achieved in implementing such schemes won her the appreciation from all and the Best Gram Panchayath Award to Chandapura.

Belief in Empowerment of women

Ashwathamma firmly believes that empowerment is the only answer to fight the oppression that women face in the society. She conducted Awareness camps, Training programmes, implemented DWCRA schemes for economic independence for women.

She formed the 'Jyothi Mahila Mandali' way back in 1983 and continues as the active founder member. She has also been selected as the President of Yashaswini Mahila Federation of Anekal Taluk since 1988 till date.

Plethora of Problems

Problems came in abundance after she took charge as the President. The person who had supported her to contest the election, started making demands. He wanted her to join his party and Ashwathamma was not prepared for that. When she declined he brought in other kinds of pressure. He demanded that she get him 'Khatha' for his lands without collecting taxes and so on. Ashwathamma refused to be a party to his illegal activity. When his pressure tactics did not work on her he started threatening that he would give a complaint to the Lokayukta. "It is sad that he wanted me to take illegal steps just because he had encouraged me to contest in the elections. I did not agree to that. My conscience wouldn't permit me for such action" says Ashwattamma.

Truth prevails

He did manage to give a complaint to Lokayukta. Though Ashwathamma had not committed any crime she was worried. For three nights sleep evaded her and people close to her comforted her. She met the Assistant Commissioner who assured her that as she is innocent she should not worry about it. Finally when the case was heard, the judge declared that if he wants *Khatha* he must pay betterment charges and closed the case. Finally truth prevailed.

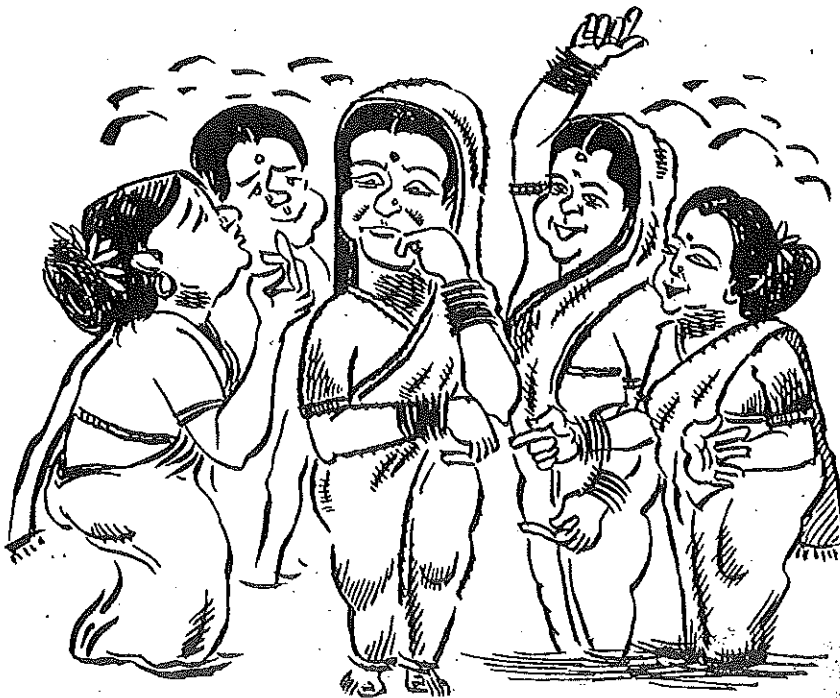
All through her tenure at the office problems came in plenty but that did not intimidate her. When she proposed to build a ten bed hospital at the village, some of her colleagues opposed and created so much trouble that she even faced the threat of 'No Confidence Motion'. But Ashwattamma was not deterred. She got the hospital sanctioned by the Taluk Panchayath. Whenever Ashwattamma confronted problems, she only became more stronger and efficient.

Ashwattamma's efforts yielded big achievements. She was successful in getting six bore wells, one Store, 98 houses for the homeless, Toilets and compound wall to six Anganawadis. The villagers were very happy with her work. It was with her efforts that Chandapura has 66 mahila sanghas today.

Awards galore

Chandapura gram panchayath got the Best Panchayath award for its most progressive developmental works. And surely Ashwathamma's efforts along with her members was responsible for this. When she took charge, Chandapura Gram Panchayath had a meagre Rs.4,998.00 in its bank account. Ashwathamma revised taxes and began a tax collection drive, which yielded a rich dividend. She was able to collect Rs. 9,72,627.00. This is considered a major achievement to this day. This revenue was well utilized to provide improved amenities to the Panchayath.

When the 'Common Wealth' Award for the outstanding contribution to rural development was given to Ashwathamma, even her opponents agreed that she deserved it!





Sprout of Strength

Uma Raja, the young Gram Panchayath President of Koothandakuppam, Tamil Nadu received the National Award for the best performance in developmental works within the stipulated period. She also received the National Best Administrator Award and UMA Award for being the Best Woman Representative at the UMA Utsav organised by ISST. Uma Raja is an excellent example of a young achiever who strives to address peoples' mandate.

Budding Talent

The students of Govt. Higher Secondary School at Jolarpet were eagerly waiting for the results of a debate. The topic was 'women's progress' and the first prize was won by young Uma of 8th standard. Even at such a tender age Uma was very forthcoming with original progressive thoughts.

Uma always stood first in her class. She grew up to be a woman of immense commitment and empathy towards other women. As there was no collage in Jolarpet, Uma could not continue her studies. But it was her father who guided her to continue her studies through correspondence course. Uma graduated with flying colours in Commerce.

Uma's father was a member of a leading political party in Tamilnadu. He was also the President of Kaveritattu Gram Panchayath. He nurtured fond hopes for his daughter and he initiated her into active politics. Soon after graduating, Uma contested for Panchayath elections and without a problem won the elections and became the Gram Panchayath President at a very young age. Sprouts of her strength set the ground for many changes to come.

First things first

Soon after taking charge of the office, Uma set herself to acquire all knowledge about the schemes made available by the govt. for the benefit of rural public. She felt that it was most often ignorance that deprives the needy from taking advantage of the govt. programmes. Uma was determined to be fully aware of all projects and schemes offered by the Government which brought rich dividends to the Gram Panchayath. Uma was successful in getting maximum funds sanctioned for her Panchayath. She was also the first Gram Panchayath President to get the funds sanctioned. She was well into implementing many projects and schemes when her



counterparts in other panchayaths were still groping in the dark and struggling to get information. This not only gave her enough lead time to complete all the projects well in advance of stipulated time, but also an opportunity to make up for the shortage of funds. Koottandakuppam became a model for every other gram panchayaths. The commendable work by Uma was worthy of appreciation and she was sanctioned the Collector's Incentive.

Home, a source of support

Uma is married, with two children. Her husband is a businessman and is not interested in politics. He is a great support to her in all her endeavours.

"As I am very busy with the Panchayath work, I don't have enough time to spend with my children. My husband helps me with other works but I have to help my children with their studies. I always make time to teach them. I also have to find time for my own studies, I am doing my M Com now. Later, I want to study law and practice." says Uma , with a smile.

Striving for Success

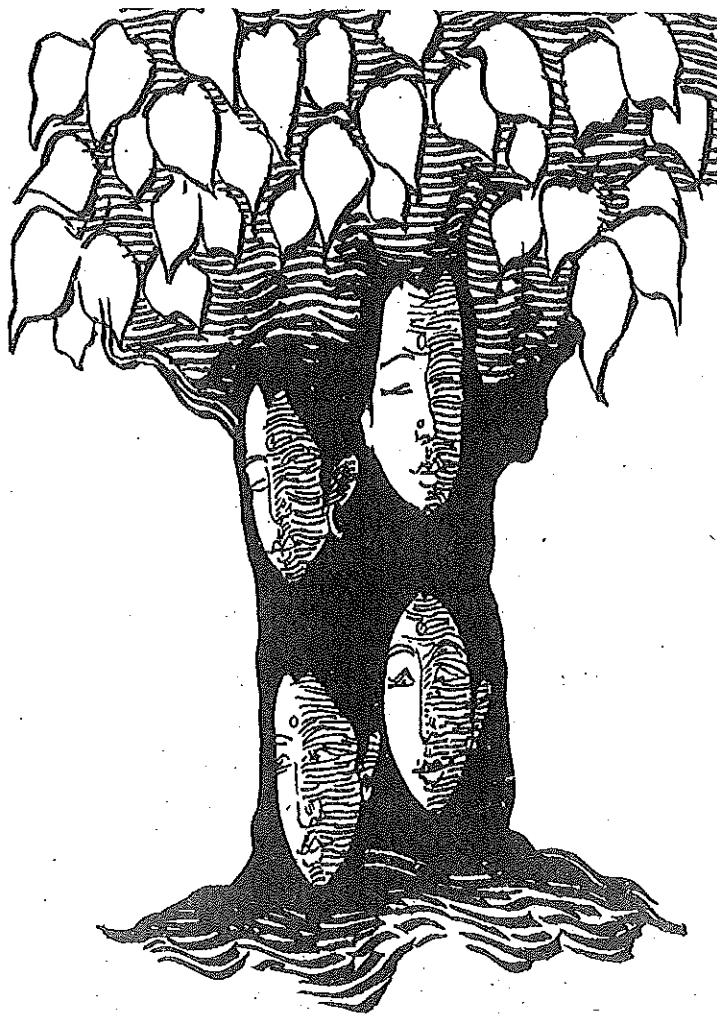
Uma is unique in the sense she coordinated with other institutions to take up projects for the benefit of the villagers. She collaborated with the Jaycees to conduct a health camp which had helped over six hundred people of that region.

Uma joined force with the district collector and senior police officers and totally eradicated alcohol in Kuttandakuppam.

" My aim is to construct a primary health centre and housing complex for the economically backward community. Before my term ends, I will be completing all the projects that I have planned" says Uma Raja, with confidence.

UMA award for Uma

Uma received the National Award for Best Administrator in Delhi on 8th March 1999. She was also awarded the National award for completing all developmental works within the stipulated time. Uma was selected as the Best Woman Representative at the UMA Utsav and she received the 'Utsahi Mahila Abhyudaya' Award.





Entry of more women in politics will eliminate corruption

Attur Block Union President Margaret Mary of Dindigal, Tamilnadu strongly propagates that more women in politics will eliminate corruption. She played a major role in making Attur block corruption free. Her belief is that women need to have political awareness which will enable them to pave the path of progress.

Call of the party

Margaret Mary has proved that, the means and efforts are just as significant as the end result. She is the Attur Block Union President of Dindigul, Tamilnadu. Her dedicated service has been an inspiration to others.

Margaret Mary is educated and took an interest in politics at an early age. She was an active member in a leading political party. The party leaders selected Mary to contest for election in recognition of her commitment and enthusiasm.

Mary was hesitant as she felt she could not handle the post of President with ease. It was one thing to work as a party member and another to contest for election. "How can I stand in front of the mike and speak? I have never interacted with men before, how can I get used to it?" - these were some of the haunting thoughts and she refused initially. But the local minister spoke to her and apprised her of her own capabilities. Mary contested and sure enough she was elected. It took her some time to get used to the idea of interacting with men. Eventually she shed her inhibitions and carried out her work with determination and courage.

Respect at a price

The first six months of working as the president was very good for Mary. Officers would even come home to take her advice and permission regarding work. They were of the opinion that Mary was as influential as the previous president and when they realised that they were wrong they started avoiding her. Their respect towards Mary also started declining. Gradually they stopped asking for her advice and even permission to carry out works. They would take decisions without her knowledge and some times would not even inform her about the meetings. When Mary questioned she was harassed for that. And she was at a loss.

Help in the form of training

The STRD called for a training camp for all the women elected for the Panchayath and Mary also attended it. When other women shared their experiences Mary realised that she was not alone in facing such problems. The women discussed and tried to find solutions to common problems. One block president from Kanyakumari narrated an incidence when the BDO was trying to act superior

to the president and once when they had to travel by jeep the BDO sat in front and asked her to sit at the back. When she raised objections to that he made fun of her. She took this issue up as a matter of violating the rights of a Block President. After heated discussions in meetings every one agreed that a resolution must be passed that all Block Presidents must travel in the front seat!

This incident taught Mary a lot particularly that if she does not take things into her hands, others would take matters into their hands which would make matters worse!

After the training camp, Mary started asserting her powers and slowly gained control of the office. Many women councillors were in the habit of bringing their husbands with them to the meetings. Mary arranged for a camp to create awareness after which camp women councillors started coming alone to the meetings. This was an encouraging step for Mary.

Going by the book

Mary opines that one of the main problems in panchayaths is the lack of coordination between the three tiers of administration. And at other times when the elected members have to attend to the immediate needs of people rules and regulations create a hurdle in the path.

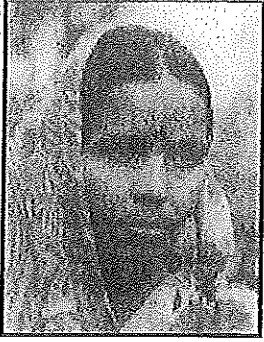
One such example is that of a woman representative from a small village near Attur. The village was facing acute water shortage. The people of the village were pleading for water. But whenever this was mentioned at the meetings, the male members would brush it aside. The woman who was elected from this village was made the target and people started pressurizing her. She was under pressure from both the sides. On one hand she had to face the wrath of the people and on the other hand the male members were very casual about it. The lady became very desperate. The villagers started harassing her.

At this stage she took the matter up and proceeded to seek support from concerned officers and finally got the water connection to that backward village. People were very happy and thankful to her but she got a summons notice from the municipal corporation to give an explanation about how she had got the water connection with out their permission!

This did not stop at that. Attur's people had to face severe problem from alcoholism. The lady president wanted to put an end to it and she got all the bootlegging units closed. She even got IRDP loans sanctioned to those engaged in this to take up other business. But this led to more problems and people started bad-mouthing the women involved by spreading rumours. Mary called for a meeting in this regard and solved the problem by explaining to the people the problems they face as peoples representatives and went on to ask the public "If we cannot share water with our next door neighbours how can we expect the next state to give us water?"

Corruption the culprit

Mary strongly believes that corruption is the root cause of all evils and that it is the main enemy of the system. "Women are not corrupt. They hardly indulge in bribe. Bribery has become a way of life. If more and more women are in Panchayaths, the corruption chain will become disjointed and we women can eradicate corruption. Women can achieve anything provided they make up their minds and stand united!" are Mary's words of conviction. Her work more than proves this and makes dreams of corruption free governance come alive!



From darkness to light

*Uttar Pradesh is known for its strong patriarchal society, which leaves little room for women to come into the open. **Kusum Gowtham Singh** of Kanpur is the first woman Sarpanch who broke through this fort to make a distinct difference to the lives of women in Kanpur. Her struggle and determination, that enabled her to overcome extreme conditions in personal life, is an eye opener to all.*

The Thakurs in Uttar Pradesh(UP) believe, to this day, that women have no say in any substantive matters. Women are not a part of decision-making, be it economic, social or political. Women are confined to the four walls of the home and are not allowed to play a role in the community development.

Kusum Singh of Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, is a name that no historian can ignore while writing about the women's movement in India. She has carved a unique niche for herself by her uncompromising stand and daring efforts to make a difference to the lives of women in UP.

How Kusum Singh became the Sarpanch (President) of Karbinvan, a small village in Kanpur, is a very rare and courageous story. "In Uttar Pradesh, women are kept out of politics for the reason of money and power. Politics in itself is very corrupt and its only in a dream one can even think of clean politics. Since a huge amount of money is spent in winning elections, the elected devote their time and effort to get back their money when they are in power. Even after the 73rd amendment to Panchayath Raj things have not changed much. In many instances, though women are elected to the reserved posts, its their husbands who run the show and a new word called 'sarpanch pati', meaning 'sarpanch husband', has come into effect. Every one accepted this with out any doubt" explains Kusum

Lonely fighter

Kusum decided to fight against this male domination. She decided to contest the Gram Panchayath elections. This created a furore in her family and neighbourhood. Her husband, in laws and relatives were against it. The entire men folk in the village opposed it. But Kusum was firm. She went door to door and spoke to the women. She convinced them that it was time for women to come out of the fort in which they were prisoners. She created awareness about women's emancipation and slowly her efforts yielded results. The women of her village saw in Kusum their own oppression and they decided to support her. Kusum won with majority votes.

Breath of fresh air

The earlier men Sarpanchs in the village used the office to satisfy their own needs and they had never considered community development as their duty. Kusum wanted to change that. She decided to take up developmental activities for the benefit of the community. Other male members strongly opposed her but she was firm. She guarded the Panchayath Funds with utmost care and never allowed any misuse or diversion. Kusum associated herself with an NGO called Sakhi-Kendra to

get experience in handling projects and funds. She found this knowledge valuable while implementing the Panchayath projects with confidence.

Victim of child marriage

Kusum was deprived of formal education since no importance was given to the education of girl children. She spent her childhood looking after her younger siblings and in household chores. When she turned thirteen, her parents got her married to a 35 year old man. He was old enough to be her father and used to beat her every day. He was also an alcoholic. At that young age, Kusum hardly knew of her rights leave alone protect them. She suffered this onslaught on her.

One day he asked her to pack-up those few belongings left of hers and 'sold' her to a new man. She was forced to leave with the new man. And this was like falling from the frying pan to the fire! She had to face more humiliation and abuse. One day when she was beaten up very badly, she found a glimmer of courage in her and she decided to run away from her new 'owners' house. Since she had nowhere else to go, so returned to her old husband's house. However this time around she became firm and stopped yielding to pressures. She began to assert herself. Kusum declared that only she can and will take any and all decisions related to her own self. The family was at first shocked and later even scared of her. For the first time in her life she felt like an individual with a mind and body of her own. Kusum took charge of her life and it was at this point that the elections for the Gram Panchayath were declared and she decided to contest.

Light at the end of the tunnel

It was an uphill task. And Kusum was determined not to yield to pressures and so she fought with all her might. The women of her village stood by her and gave her all the support. It was not easy to fight the Thakurs. "But, we could not be meek spectators to their atrocities. Women have to take courage at some time. Only when we assert ourselves will others take us seriously. Women are more hardworking compared to men. We are more honest and wish for community welfare. Women are not corrupt. We make sincere efforts and in my opinion, instead of a meagre 33% we all must unite and ask for 50% reservation for women. That should be our aim. We can do it." says Kusum who has seen life in its ugliest forms and worked for the Panchayath with commitment with a special concern for the women and other exploited sections in society.





Progress comes of Systematic Planning

Thresiamma Antony of Amburi Gram Panchayath is a young leader who made a mark in Local Self Governance in Kerala. She is a M.Sc. in Mathematics. She has successfully proved that systematic planning plays a crucial role in achieving success.

Literacy and political awareness

Kerala has achieved high literacy rates even for women in comparison to the other states of India. Even at the Gram Panchayath Levels one can find many well-educated women actively involved in its functioning.

Thresiamma Antony, belongs to the Amburi Gram Panchayath of Neyyanthikara Taluk.

She was a brilliant student and took part in various activities. She was an active member of Students' Federation of India. Thresiamma was also elected as the Student Vice-Chairperson of the College. She was a KSSP member and played a major role in the People's Science Movement. Politics was not new to her.

Thresiamma was well aware of the social and political issues and she had a pro-public attitude and a service oriented approach. She contested for the Panchayath elections which was fiercely fought with seven very strong candidates in the fray for the women's reserved seat. She won the fiercely fought elections and proved her credentials.

No tall promises only accurate plans

Ambur had a population of about 20,000. In Thresiamma's constituency the population was approximately 16,000. Of this, about 60% belonged to the scheduled castes and tribes. They were deprived of basic amenities and it was a challenge for the Panchayaths to deal with this issue.

Thresiamma who was well aware of these challenges had not made tall promises to the people during the campaign. Her only promise to the people was that she shall work honestly. Soon after assuming office she set out to develop a detailed and accurate plan for the Panchayath.

Unexpected Presidency

Thresiamma was elected only as a member. But the president post fell into her lap unexpectedly. There is a river that people have to cross over to reach Amburi. A ferry boat carried people to and fro. The boat had become very unsafe and this matter was raised by Thresiamma and asked for immediate repair of the boat or purchase of a new one. The then President not only ignored her suggestion but also trivialized the entire issue.

When the condition of the ferryboat became too bad people started using bamboo floats to cross the river. Unfortunately, this resulted in an accident. A woman drowned when the bamboo float turned over due to overweight. "This is the most tragic incident that occurred during my tenure" says Thresiamma with a heavy heart.

The accident resulted in a huge public uproar and questions were raised. The then President lost the vote of confidence and Thresiamma was made the President. The very first task taken up by Thresiamma upon becoming the president was to get two new boats at a cost of Rs. One lakh.

Boons of systematic pro-people plan

After two years of Thresiamma's term as the Gram Panchayath President, the People's Plan Campaign came into effect. This helped her to undertake many more projects for the development of her Panchayath. She got a sanction for Rs.26,65,000 to take up developmental activities. She gave a priority to Gram Sabhas and made detailed report of the progress in various works of the Panchayaths during these Grama Sabhas. Projects were developed after accurate and detailed planning with the people. People's needs and priorities got reflected in Panchayath Plans. In fact, this was the highlight of the Peoples Plan Campaign launched by the then Government across the state of Kerala. For the second year Thresiamma continued with the process of detailed and accurate plan and project preparation. Her Panchayath got Rs.37,80,000.

Amburi Gram Panchayath showed effective results. The Panchayath was capable of handling any problem and found solutions. "The main reason for this is the systematic planning done keeping people's priorities in mind" shares Thresiamma. "If one makes all required preparations before launching a programme then one is sure to succeed. For systematic planning we need to build a team of experts and then decide upon appropriate fund allocation among the various projects of the Panchayath with consensus from all". Thresiamma feels this process is a sure formula for success. And this allows little room for discontent and discrepancies.

The People's Plan Campaign aimed at increasing productivity, poverty alleviation and elimination of corruption. In the first phase, the emphasis was on women's participation at all levels in all projects of the Panchayaths. In the second phase, the govt. issued a notice that 10% of the budget was reserved for projects related to women. But most of the Panchayaths did not know how to make use of this facility. "Earlier, the Mahila Sanghas were not working effectively at the Block level. Now, we are concentrating on 14 Anganawadis. New mahila sanghas are formed, we have conducted Awareness Camps, competitions for women to showcase their talents and skills." says Thresiamma. She herself was instrumental in forming 20 mahila sanghas. She firmly believes that this will help the women to gain economic independence, at least to some extent. In the sangha weekly meetings they are not only inspired to save but also to discuss other issues relating to women and the world around which helps in awareness building. The women of Amburi Gram Panchayath marched together in a procession at the advent of the new millennium. It was the first time, in Amburi, that women had actively come together to show their solidarity. The programmes for women became so successful that men started demanding Thresiamma to plan something for men! They wanted to be a part of this progress!

Award for Amburi

Amburi Gram Panchayath received the second best panchayath award. Thresiamma is happy about her work as the President. "Some times I have to work for long hours and there are days when I work through the night. This attitude and preparedness to work made it possible for me to control corrupt officers and implement projects for the benefit of people. There was one secretary who was very corrupt. I had to get him dismissed. Otherwise all our efforts would have gone waste. This also resulted in transparency and alertness in others" says a satisfied Thresiamma. She managed to get a new building for the Panchayath office, a veterinary hospital, a primary health unit, houses for poor, 400 toilets, electricity to huts of tribal community...Thresiamma's ceaseless zeal commands respect from all.



Decentralization can deliver development

Jalaja Chandran, president of Mohamma Gram Panchayath, in Kerala, has proved that decentralization and effective co ordination delivers development. She was instrumental in making Mohamma Gram Panchayath a proud recipient of the Best Panchayath Award.

Kumarakom is a popular tourist location in Kerala. The lake Vembanad is the pride of all there and Mohamma is a small village on the banks of Vembanad. However, Mohamma is popular for yet another reason. It received the Best Panchayath Award for its most progressive implementation of schemes.

The Mohamma Gram Panchayath office is a beehive of activities. Often a rare sight elsewhere but seemed quite common here is the presence of large numbers of women at the Panchayath office. They are the rural women who have taken up various developmental activities with the help of panchayath and interact with panchayaths on a regular basis.

The beginnings

Jalaja Chandran, the President of Mohamma Gram Panchayath nurtured the dream of a time when all women are independent and equal. She believed that income generating activities for women is important to realize this dream. Mohamma became well known as the Panchayath that had given maximum benefits to women. It was also the panchayath where maximum women's participation was recorded. Mohamma made best possible use of funds allotted for women's development. As the Panchayath President, Jalaja Chandran worked on her idea of promoting traditional occupations of Kerala women, like fishing, coir products industry, agriculture, shell products etc. into an enterprising venture. She successfully involved private and technical institutions to help women undertake such activities. The women received consistent trainings which yielded better results.

Dream come true

For Jalaja, it was dream come true when she won the election and became the President of Mohamma Gram Panchayath. She grew up in Mohamma and from her childhood she had dreamt of serving people of Mohamma. Her father was a member of a leading political party. Influenced by her father's active political activity she joined the children's wing of the political party. Thus, even as a child Jalaja got involved in community service. Later at college, she played an active role in the Students Federation. By the time she was out of collage Jalaja was well into politics and became active member of Youth Federation and Women's Federation. She took part in various movements for the social cause.

Jalaja married a co-activist in the party and is a mother of two. Her family supports Jalaja to the fullest extent. "With out the family support I could not have achieved so much in such a short period. My long hours of work, travelling are all possible because of the cooperation I get from my family" affirms Jalaja.

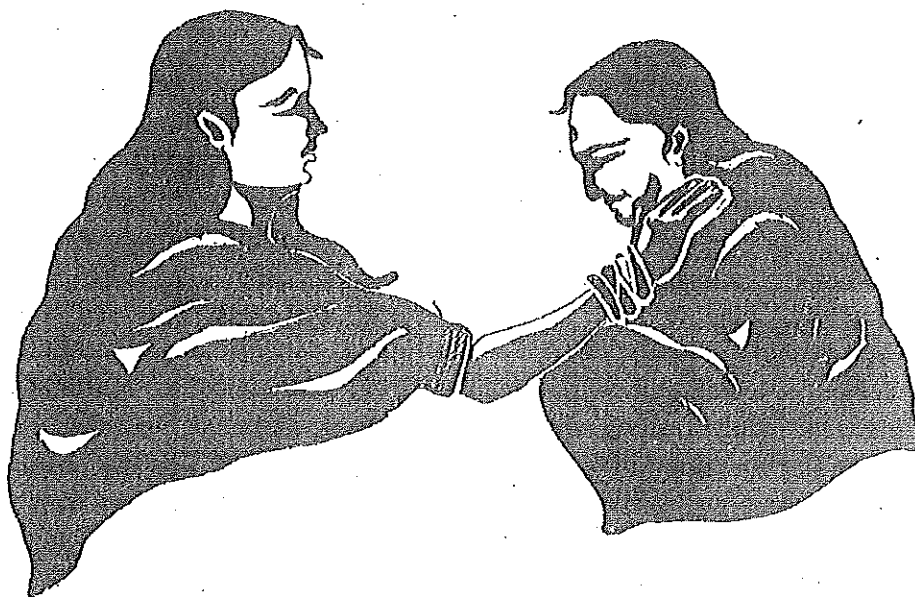
"Family support along with commitment to the cause and sincerity go a long way in establishing a woman's credibility. Otherwise there is this constant threat of character assassination and mistrust. For this, one must be well prepared and well versed in the policy matters. Political ignorance, along with old-fashioned attitude and non-cooperative colleagues can make things very difficult for women" says Jalaja. "When new women come into the field, they have the double task of proving themselves as able workers as well as confront aspersions on their character. And the onus to prove her integrity falls on the woman which is unfair".

Women friendly panchayath

Though, the funds allotted for rural development for any gram panchayath in a year was 2 to 4 lakhs on an average, Jalaja managed to get Rs. 70 lakhs sanctioned, by convincing the authorities about the developmental projects that she had envisaged. Today Mohamma is known as 'women friendly panchayath'. Instead of the 10% of total funds reserved for women's development as part of women component Jalaja at times had even allotted 13%. She believes in total, holistic progress of women, encouraging the mahila sangha to discuss and become aware of all issues affecting and pertaining to women and not limit their activities to savings and income generation only.

Learning experience

"When we started there were no role models for us to follow. We had to start from the scratch and prove ourselves. It was a learning experience. It enabled me to understand different situations in their proper perspective, plan and implement effectively. Its my experience that even women who are not well educated can succeed with proper planning and decentralizing power. Training is an important factor here. Appropriate training can make all the difference and helps in solving many a problems" explains Jalaja





From Parda to Power

Fathima Bee, is the first Asian recipient of the International UNO Award for excellence in rural development. Her story of metamorphosis from an ordinary, tradition-bound muslim woman, behind the 'Parda' to that of a progressive, socially aware activist is astounding. She not only broke the barriers around herself but also made significant changes to the lives of women in the backward Kalva village of Andra Pradesh.

17th October, 1998 is an important day, not only in the history of Kalva, a small village in the Kurnool district of Andra Pradesh, but also in the Indian history. On that day Fathima Bee, President of Kalva Gram Panchayath received the UNO Award for her contribution to rural development, becoming the first Indian to get this award. Prior to this, Fathima Bee had received the Best Sarpanch Award from the Andhra Pradesh Government.

Behind the Parda

Dramatic turn of events changed Fathima Bee's life. She was a traditional muslim woman who never stepped out of her house. Kalva being a very backward village, illiteracy and poverty ruled most of the lives there.

In 1995, one UNDP project officer, by name Vijayabharathi, came to Kalva, to introduce poverty elimination programmes to the village. Her target group was rural women. But her beginning efforts went futile as no woman ever came out to talk to her. They were all in 'Parda'. They were not coming out their houses. But Vijayabharathi did not give up her efforts. She befriended the children, played with them, taught them songs and games. Through the children she became close to the mothers. She met each person and tried to gain confidence. When Vijayabharathi enquired who the Sarpanch (President) was, she learnt that it was Fathima Bee, and that was because President's seat was reserved for women. But the truth was that Fathima's husband was looking after all the duties of the Sarpanch. Vijayabharathi befriended Fathima and educated her about the role of Sarpanch and how she should think about the welfare of the village. She also created awareness about the social and economic status of women.

'Let the Sarpanch come'

One day, the District Collector came on a tour and visited Kalva village. He wanted to meet the Sarpanch. When he sent for the Sarpanch, Fathima Bee's husband came to meet him. The Collector was surprised. He insisted that the Sarpanch herself come to the meeting. Fathima Bee had to come for the meeting. This incident, along with Vijayabharathi's advice and District Collector's guidance changed Fathima Bee's outlook in life. She decided that she must step out of the house and take interest in the community welfare. She started to learn about the Panchayath. A training camp was arranged for the elected women at Hyderabad by the UNDP. Fathima Bee attended this camp and it proved a turning point in her life.

'I too wanted to be like Ramulamma'

During the training programme, a film show was arranged for the benefit of the trainees.

It was called 'Osayee Ramulamma' It was about a Dalit woman who fights against all odds for the welfare of the village. This film made a deep impact on Fathima Bee.

"I too wanted to be like Ramulamma and work for my community" said Fathima.

She realised that to serve the people it was inevitable that she step out of the four walls of her house. "It wasn't only me. When I came out of the house many other women also started coming out their houses to undertake many training programmes and form Self Help Groups and slowly this led to better economic condition" says Fathima. Poverty being the most serious culprit that kept the people of Kalva village in the dark and hence she felt it was very important to tackle this problem. Once the women learnt that they too could earn a living, they gradually gained confidence. There was no need to go hungry any more. They could feed the children and even give them education.

'Proddu'- self help group

Fathima Bee was responsible for women at Kalva to come together to form 25 'Proddu' self help groups. Each group had 12 to 15 members and they underwent training, started income generating units and learnt the importance of savings. "Proddu actually means rising sun. In many ways it was the dawn, as many women started leading a decent living for the first time" says Fathima.

Rural Development Association

The Proddus formed into 'Aikya Sangha', the federation units and finally the Rural Development Association was established. Each Aikya sangha had 25 Proddus in them.

The Rural Development Association had different office bearers and conducts elections to the posts. The main aim of the Association is to give financial assistance, but takes keen interest in creating awareness among women on various issues and helps them to become independent. The Association works for elimination of poverty, illiteracy, child labour, exodus of rural youth to the cities and population explosion. It addressed problems of unemployment of women, inadequate roads, toilets, debt burden, oppression by the money lenders, inadequate health care at the village, water shortage and other problems.

Journey from being child bearing machines to being a woman

The Rural Development Association, formulated a detailed plan for the development of the village. It included educating the girl children, self employment for women, uniting to fight against child marriage, starting "Amma Voodi", centre for child care for the poor, "Jeevana Jyothi", a project to help destitute women and widows, training programmes in handicrafts for women and other progressive plans. "We needed an investment of Rs. 18 lakhs for implementing all these projects. The women got together and collected Rs.2.70 lakhs and the UNDP contributed about Rs.1.3 lakhs. Before we started the Proddus, women were mainly seen as child bearing machines. After the Proddus came into existence, the whole image of women changed and it resulted in drastic changes in the life and outlook of the people of Kalva" says Fathima.

More plans

Success of these plans, led to commencement of many other plans like old age pension, monthly allowance of Rs.50 to eliminate beggary, old age homes for beggars, etc. Practice of child marriage was totally abandoned in Kalva.

Help thy neighbour

When neighbouring villages saw what progress Kalva had made they wanted to emulate the same. The neighbouring village of Chintanapalli wanted the guidance of Kalva to implement the developmental activities in their village. Kalva took Chintanapalli under its care and provided guidance and donated a sum of Rs.25,000 as the initial fund.

UNO Award

Fathima's achievement won her many awards. The Andhra Pradesh Government honoured her with the Best Sarpanch Award. Later Fathima Bee received the UNO Award. On her way to New York to receive the award, Fathima said "I had not set out of my village and had not even seen a town in my life. I had never spoken in the presence of male members of my family, let alone sit in front of them. This award and all these changes were possible because of self help groups, coordination and training. It only proves that women can achieve anything given a chance". And she strives on to make it possible for many more women to get that 'chance' to transform their lives.

ABOUT US

ISST is a non-profit organisation with its head office in Delhi and branch office in Bangalore. ISST is dedicated to action research to ensure social justice and equity for the underprivileged with a focus on women. It strives to combine fieldwork and related research with action programmes and seeks to relate the micro with the macro reality. In recognition of its efforts, ISST was conferred NGO Consultative Status by the United Nations.

Over the years, ISST has undertaken several pioneering action and research endeavors to initiate alternative development strategies that recognize the role and contribution of women. The emphasis at ISST is on action research, documenting and disseminating information, expanding information bases, networking and providing liaison services at national as well as international levels. The Institute has provided insights, inputs and resource materials to researchers, Governments and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), on subject ranging from Panchayat Raj, Capacity Building of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) to Adult Education, HIV/AIDS and Gender issues.

ISST Bangalore has over the years acquired expertise in evolving strategies and working towards strengthening Women in Local Governance in Karnataka through its projects. ISST Bangalore has undertaken the project "Women in Local Governance" being funded by Action Aid India from 1999. With its objective in view, ISST runs a Resource Centre at the Bangalore office. This Resource Centre is actively involved in Strengthening Women in Local Governance through research, field studies, participatory training, documentation, publication and dissemination at multi-levels. It is accessible to activists, academicians, policy makers, individuals, researchers, students, women's organisations and to governmental and non governmental organisation (NGOs) who are engaged in enhancing the capabilities of women in various ways from across the state, nation and beyond.

"UMA Prachar" is the quarterly resource letter on Panchayat Raj being published in three languages by ISST Bangalore. It has since 2001 commenced publication of an innovative, illustrated Wall Magazine in Kannada titled "Namma Panchayathi" for Elected Representatives and the Community. This is the first of its kind in Karnataka State.

Our Publications



RESOURCE BOOKS :

1. Panchayat Parihara (2001)
2. Blooming Beyond Barriers - Case Studies (2001)
3. Grama Sabha - People's Sabha (2001)
4. Grama Panchayat Budget - Karnataka (2001)
5. What Works (1999)
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7. From Darkness to Light (1997)
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RESOURCE LETTER :

- UMA Prachar - English, Kannada and Tamil (2001)

WALL MAGAZINE :

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REPORTS :

1. Gender, Governance and Grama Sabha: Regional Seminar (2001)
2. Training Reports of 3 Phases (2001)
3. All Women Gram Panchayat - (a) Athnur, Gulbarga (b) Wanjerkheda, Bidar
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9. Training Methodology & Material: Workshop Report (1999)
10. Mydolalu: All Women Grama Panchayat (1998)
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12. National Seminar Report (1995)
13. UMA MELA Report (1995)

TRAINING MATERIALS :

1. Snake & Ladder Game (1997)
2. Clock (1997)

NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS :

- Newspaper Clippings on Panchayat Raj (1993-2001)

Institute of Social Studies Trust



N 601, 6th Floor, North Block, Manipal Centre, No. 47, Dickenson Road, Bangalore - 42.
Phone : (080)-5583701, Fax : (080) 5583704 E-mail : isstbng@giasbg01.vsnl.net.in

Head Office : ISST, India Habitat Centre, Upper Ground Floor, East Court Zone 6,
Lodi Road, New Delhi - 110 003. Phone : 011-4647873, Fax : 011-4648724

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